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Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/40745>



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Book Review: The Shia Revival by NPS Prof. Nasr

Friday, August 11, 2006

Review By Irshad Manji The New York Times originally posted on August 11, 2006

The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future. By Vali Nasr. 287 pages. \$25.95. W. Norton & Company.

In February, a group of Sunni Muslims bombed the Golden Mosque in Samarra, Iraq, one of Shiite Islam's holiest sites. Meanwhile, Muslims continued rioting over Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Prompted by the week's violence, HBO's Bill Maher pulled a Rodney King and asked, "Can't we all just get Allah?" As a guest on his show that night, I howled offstage. But the joke fell flatter than my hair under a head scarf. Most of Maher's studio audience didn't get it.

Americans may be paying more attention to Muslim conflicts now. They had better. In "The Shia Revival," a fast-moving, engaging and ultimately unnerving book, Vali Nasr writes that wars within Islam "will shape the future." A professor at the Naval Postgraduate School and an occasional adviser to the American government, Nasr argues that Operation Iraqi Freedom has tilled the soil for a "new" Middle East - one fueled less by the ideal of democracy than by an age-old animosity between Islam's two major sects, the majority Sunnis and minority Shiites.

Their split has a violent history, initiated in A.D. 632 by a feud over who should succeed the prophet Muhammad. Some Muslims supported the prophet's cousin Ali. More Muslims endorsed the prophet's elder companion, Abu Bakr, and they won. Grudges died hard, however, and the disgruntled murdered three of the first four successors to the prophet. These assassinations spawned a hunger for stability, even at the price of tyranny.

The trade-off precipitated Islam's most stubborn schism. The Sunnis (followers of the "sunnah" or traditions) backed a fifth successor, whose iron fist ensured order at all costs. To preserve power, his son slaughtered the prophet's own grandchild Hussein. At this, the horrified dissidents could no longer stay silent. Insisting that only blood relatives of the prophet had Allah's blessing to lead Muslims, they maintained that Ali should have been the first successor all along. The Shiites ("partisans of Ali") broke away.

In the wake of that rupture, Nasr explains, Shiites and Sunnis developed different values and visions. Sunnis historically considered worldly success as a sign of Allah's favor; political engagement and empire-building have been religious callings for them. Shiites tended to emphasize moral victories rather than political ones, taking as their central narrative Hussein's valiant but failed fight against a dictator - the Saddam Hussein of yore. Through this and related stories, Shiites have found meaning in physical hardship, material loss, social exclusion and personal martyrdom. Suffering has helped them cultivate faith that their messiah (another of the prophet's descendants) will usher in the End of Days and bring justice to people everywhere. But what Shiites treat as essential Islamic virtues, Sunnis regard as post-prophet corruptions. That's why, Nasr observes, "Saudi textbooks, criticized for their anti-Semitism, are equally hostile to Shiism, characterizing the faith as a form of heresy."

"The Shia Revival" is at its most provocative when exposing how the Sunni-Shiite power imbalance seeps out of classrooms and infects Muslim life on the ground. Nasr reports that in Lebanon, Shiites were "forced to fight for the Palestinian cause, and even to sacrifice their own and their children's lives and property for it." In Dubai, a senior government official fears speaking Persian - the language of Shiite Iran - unless assured "absolute privacy." In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini's fantasy of avenging Sunni

arrogance drove him to anoint countless village boys as martyrs in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980's. (Paradoxically, Khomeini helped Sunnify Shiism by assuming the role of autocrat and empire-seeker, while helping Sunnis to Shiify their creed by glorifying martyrdom - a tactic since adopted by the Sunni brain trust of Hamas and Islamic Jihad.) Above all, Nasr reveals, the growing influence of Khomeini's Shiite soldiers throughout the Middle East led Saudi Arabia to forge an "axis" with Pakistan, a country where Shiites are commonly labeled "mosquitoes." The aim of this axis? To "underwrite the Taliban's conquest of Afghanistan" and exploit it "as a training ground for various 'holy warrior' outfits." Now for Nasr's kicker: "It was in worrying about that axis - and the threat from Baathist Iraq - that Iran first became interested in a nuclear arsenal." With or without Washington's meddling, it appears that Muslims find ways to conspire against one another. Take heart, America. It's not all your fault.

Still, George W. Bush has been naïve in underestimating the Sunni-Shiite chasm, especially in Iraq. Despite adopting the slogans of a secular nationalist, Saddam Hussein, like most Arab leaders, was actually a Sunni chauvinist. (Nasr reports that he approached the shah of Iran for permission to kill the ultra-Shiite Khomeini, then an exile living in Paris. The shah declined Hussein's offer.) The problem is that liberating Iraq's Shiites has stoked their hopes for domination - not just representation - in the new Middle East. Witness the upstart militancy of Hezbollah, in alliance with Iran. Nasr says a showdown could be coming between Iran, the Shiite heavyweight, and Saudi Arabia, the Sunni behemoth. "Ultimately," he predicts, "the character of the region will be decided in the crucible of Shia revival and the Sunni response to it." Amid such an ancient rivalry, how can American Mideast policy effectively advocate rule of law, transparency and human rights - the cornerstones of any democracy? That's a question Vali Nasr doesn't address, a revealing omission in an otherwise riveting analysis. One suspects that far from being a superpower, the United States is about to become a superpawn. Whatever the final chapter of this drama, Washington won't write it. Muslims will.

Irshad Manji, a fellow at Yale University, is the author of "The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith."

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